

Art Westphal is most fulfilled when members of the audience leave his meetings, never to return. His attitude may seem odd, compared to the traditional perspective of most lay workers and preachers. However, Westphal, a recently retired carpenter at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California, has been speaking, singing, and praying with the inmates at the Vacaville State Medical Correction Facility for the past 15 years. His greatest desire is that his captive audience be freed—permanently.

Westphal is intimately involved with PUC's Prison Ministries Program, which seeks to enrich the lives of prison inmates through weekly visits and chapel services. Early on, he realized the potential of student commitment to the program, and has sought to include students in as many ways as possible. As a result, a symbiotic relationship has developed between the students and the prisoners.

The goal of Prison Ministries is to enable inmates to overcome the statistical odds that 85 percent of them will return to prison soon after they are released. And so, sometimes alone and other times accompanied by dedicated and eager PUC students, Art Westphal goes to prison every week to introduce the God of love.

The chapel services themselves are simple but spirited. The lesson study, led by two inmates, is followed by a song service. Westphal says the prisoners "like songs with a little pep," and they sing energetically in English and Spanish for about an hour. Finally, Westphal, a student, or a guest speaker delivers a sermon. Because of the rapid turnover of inmates, the sermons focus on presenting God's love rather than teaching deep doctrinal issues. The ultimate goal of each service is to bring the prisoners a little closer to God.

In the prison environment, the actions of each inmate are closely and warily observed by fellow prisoners; as a result, the Christian inmates are noticed. They experience the benefits of God's protection. Sincere religious convictions are usually respected in the prison—Christians do not have to participate in the abuse and executions carried out con-

stantly by the notorious prison gangs. Although acts of violence occur routinely in the heavily guarded theater next door, the chapel, though unguarded, remains free of brutality and bloodshed.

Even so, it is easy to underestimate a program like this. However, the numbers show that the prison ministry is working. For years, the state has tried numerous therapy and social programs to rehabilitate inmates and integrate them into the outside world. But where these expensive and involved programs have failed (nearly 85 percent return), the simple weekly chapel services have triumphed. In fact, although the state has never published the study, Westphal revealed that "of those who have done the chapel program, only 10 percent come back."

As staggering as these numbers are, Westphal is even more overwhelmed by the personal responses of former inmates. He has been approached several times in church by reformed prisoners who told him that the chapel services were the turning points in their lives. Because the legal system forbids him to contact the prisoners immediately after they are released, he treasures these conversations that reaffirm the success of the ongoing ministry.

Ministry has been a lifetime commitment for Art Westphal. His father, a former president of the Mexican Union of Seventh-day Adventists, was a great believer in the importance of lay workers carrying out much of the church's work. Art adopted this philosophy at an early age and has been actively spreading the gospel ever since. Although he spent two years in the theology program at Pacific Union College, he finally decided to become a carpenter with special witnessing skills. He has never been disappointed by his choice to follow Christ's example in ministry.

Having enjoyed the benefits of service for many years, Westphal wants others to experience the same fulfillment. This is why he feels that student involvement in Prison Ministries is crucial. He humbly insists that "the students make the program." Their presence gives him time to grapple with the paperwork that is required of him by the state—and the prisoners enjoy interacting with people their age.

For students, prison ministry is quite

PRISON MINISTRIES

Setting Captives Free

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BY HEATHER LACKEY

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a commitment, compared to some other outreach programs. Not only do the students visit the prison every week, but all participating students must be cleared by security before they can enter the prison. Amic Sanford, student director of Prison Ministries at PUC, sees the program as well worth the time commitment. "It's one of the greatest ministries," she affirms. "Because the prisoners can't get out, we have to bring the service to them. They don't have the option of saying, 'I'd like to go to church today.'"

The students recognize how vital their contributions to the inmates are, and this spurs them on in service. Even shy and reticent students blossom in the chapel ministry environment, gaining courage to share

Students have brought a variety of programs to the prison, including a recent performance by Pacific Union College's gospel choir, *Caught Up*.

in surprising ways. Amic feels that students gain an extra blessing because they know

they are bringing the prisoners something they cannot obtain in any other way. And this reveals the true purpose of student ministry—to provide that double blessing that results when people dare to reach out in service, only to find their own lives enriched as well. ✍

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PUC students prepare to go out and minister to the inmates in the best way possible—with prayer.

Art Westphal